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# *Military Leaders Are Encouraging the Election of a Civilian* **In Guatemala, the Army's Retreat May Be Good Politics**

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## **Autonomous Commanders**

GUATEMALA — The Guatemalan Army is running out of money, options and time. After 30 years of nearly unbroken rule, the commanders who govern the country have proved incapable of managing the worst depression since the 1930's. At the same time, they find themselves fighting a continuing guerrilla war with aging equipment, while public support withers and foreign friends dwindle in a period when military regimes are less and less accepted in polite international company.

To escape such difficulties, the army is breaking tradition and encouraging the election of a civilian president in November. American officials are backing the move; the Guatemalan head of state, General Oscar Mejía Victores, says he has been assured that aid will increase once a civilian takes office. But skeptics, and there are many, wonder if the military will allow a new president more than formal power. "The army is disposed to hand over the civil government," said Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo, head of the Christian Democratic party and a leading contender for the presidency. "But the real work will be to diminish the power now concentrated in the single institution of the armed forces."

The military has dominated political life in Guatemala since a coup planned and supported by the C.I.A. brought rightist army officers and their supporters to power in 1964. Since then, the army, allied with the conservative members of the business community, has either stolen elections, convinced serious candidates not to run or simply killed potential opponents and critics. A civilian, Julio César Méndez Monténegro, was elected president in 1988. But he was quickly forced to cede most authority to the army, an experience that Guatemalan political leaders fear could be repeated.

What one foreign diplomat termed a "national security paranoia" has made direct challenges to the army's domination highly dangerous. Military intelligence, known as G-2, is thought to operate widely, and is widely feared. In the countryside, the army is the de facto government, having rolled back a Marxist rebel insurgency by killing thousands of Indian peasants who supported the rebels. The military now administers a series of strategic hamlets and has forced virtually every male Indian, more than 800,000 in all, to join a civil defense unit. Some civilian politicians fear the army could swing the election simply by telling civil defense commanders how their men should vote.

Army influence is further extended through militarized committees known as "inter-institutional coordinators," headed by officers. The committees run local affairs in 80 percent of the country. Lt. Col. Luis Francisco Rios, an officer who helps run the committees, explains their purpose using a diagram that depicts the committees as a machine into which problems are fed and answers emerge. There is no place shown in the mechanism for political debate or political parties.

The committees are headed by departmental commanders who have historically been laws unto themselves. If the commander happens to be unfriendly or incompetent, local residents are "flat out of luck," in the words of a foreign diplomat specializing in military affairs. "We are talking about a country that is the closest thing to a feudal system in the western hemisphere," said another foreign envoy. "Military zone commanders are autonomous. They are only punished by transfers."

Punishing army officers is a matter that civilian presidential contenders have managed to overlook. Unlike the way it was in Argentina, no candidate is asking that the army be held accountable for killing innocent people. A Western diplomat said he doubted a civilian could risk taking an officer to court. "I don't think the army would take it very kindly," he said.

For his part, Gen. Mejía has repeatedly stated that the military has never committed a single human rights abuse. There is no sense that the army feels defeated or remorseful. A fresh slogan painted in foot-high letters on the wall of the large military base in the town of Santa Cruz Quiché states: "Only he who fights has the right to win. Only he who wins has the right to live."

As the electoral contest gathers speed, more political violence is likely and factional fights within the army can be expected. One foreign official said there had been four overlapping coup plots within the last three months, even though the United States Embassy has gone out of its way to let the army know that a coup will imperil American aid. "We are dead-set against anybody interrupting the democratic process," said the United States Ambassador, Alberto M. Piedra.

The Reagan Administration's policy toward the army will help determine the military's willingness to go back to the barracks and stay there. The economic crisis will provide leverage as Guatemala seeks increased assistance. Then again, in 1977 the army refused American help rather than clean up its human rights record.

Some Administration officials point to El Salvador as an example Guatemala could follow. But in El Salvador, it took three years of Congressional pressure, impending defeat at the hands of a guerrilla army and, finally, direct orders from the White House to force military commanders to give civilian politicians a chance.